NCA
VOC FOR PGM/FN
BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-6119 SEPTEMBER 1, 1978
SUSAN MILLER

LEBANESE FLASHPOINT

ANNCR:

LEBANON HAS REMAINED HIGH ON THE LIST OF WORLD TROUBLE SPOTS SINCE THE CIVIL WAR IN THAT COUNTRY ENDED NEARLY TWO YEARS AGO. THE STANDARD LINEUP OF FORCES IN THAT CONFRONTATION WAS CHRISTIAN VERSUS MOSLEM, WITH PALESTINIAN LEFTISTS JOINING IN ON THE MOSLEM SIDE. THE WAR ENDED IN A STALEMATE, WHEN SYRIAN TROOPS ENTERED THE FIGHTING TO PREVENT A CHRISTIAN DEFEAT. BUT THE SYRIAN-CHRISTIAN ALLIANCE WAS SHORT-LIVED, AND NOW THE FACE OF THE LEBANESE CONFLICT HAS CHANGED. IN RECENT MONTHS, THE SYRIANS HAVE TURNED ON THEIR FORMER ALLIES -- THE CHRISTIAN MILITIAS -- IN AN EFFORT TO RESTORE THE AUTHORITY OF THE LEBANESE GOVERNMENT. V-O-A'S SUSAN MILLER HAS THIS BACKGROUND REPORT.

VOICE:

THE SYRIANS SAY THEY ARE ACTING FOR THE SAKE OF LEBANESE UNITY, BUT THE CHRISTIAN MILITANTS WHO ARE TAKING THE BRUNT OF THE SYRIAN OFFENSIVE CLAIM THAT SYRIAS REAL AIM IS TO DISARM THE CHRISTIAN MILITIAS -- AS A PRELUDE TO A COMPLETE TAKEOVER.

LAST WEEKEND (8/26-27), SYRIAN FORCES SWEPT THROUGH LEBANESE STRONGHOLDS IN THE NORTH OF THE COUNTRY, IN AN ALLEGED MOVE AGAINST ARMS-SMUGGLERS. BY TUESDAY THE OPERATION WAS COMPLETE, AND NEWS REPORTS SAID THE SYRIANS HAD SEIZED A SUBSTANTIAL PORTION OF FORMERLY CHRISTIAN TERRITORY. A SPOKESMAN FOR THE RIGHT-WING FALANGIST FORCES SAID AT LEAST SIXTY-FIVE CHRISTIANS DIED IN THE FIGHTING, WHILE SYRIAN CASUALTIES WERE LIGHT.

THE STEPPED-UP SYRIAN OFFENSIVE LED ISRAELI PARLIAMENTARY LEADERS TO WARN AGAINST WHAT THEY CALLED FURTHER MASSACRES OF THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY IN LEBANON. FOR SOME TIME, ISRAEL HAS BACKED

THE CHRISTIAN MILITIAS AS A COUNTERFORCE TO PALESTINIAN GUERRILLAS IN SOUTHERN LEBANON. FOR SIMILAR REASONS, ISRAEL OPPOSES A SYRIAN PREDOMINANCE IN LEBANON, BELIEVING THAT IT WOULD COMPOUND DIFFICULTIES ON ISRAEL'S SENSITIVE NORTHERN BORDER.

ISRAELI KNESSET LEADER MOSHE ARENS TOOK THE LEAD MONDAY BY URGING THE BEGIN GOVERNMENT TO ACT IMMEDIATELY TO HALT THE SYRIAN ATTACKS. MISTER ARENS CONCEDED THAT HIS AIM IN SPEAKING OUT WAS TO PROD THE UNITED STATES TO WITHDRAW WHAT HE CALLED ITS "TACIT" SUPPORT OF THE SYRIAN PRESENCE IN LEBANON.

ON WEDNESDAY, ISRAELI FOREIGN MINISTER MOSHE DAYAN SAID ISRAEL'S AIM WAS TO PREVENT A SYRIAN TAKEOVER IN LEBANON AND TO RETURN THAT COUNTRY TO ITS "STATUS-QUO". HOWEVER, HE SAID ISRAEL WAS UNLIKELY TO RESORT TO A MILITARY SOLUTION AT THIS TIME, BUT WOULD USE DIPLOMATIC AND POLITICAL MEANS INSTEAD. HE ADDED THAT THE ISRAELI GOVERNMENT IS MAINTAINING CLOSE CONTACTS WITH WASHINGTON ON THE LEBANESE SITUATION.

THE U-S RESPONSE TO THE GROWING CRISIS HAS BEEN AN APPEAL TO ALL PARTIES TO SHOW MAXIMUM RESTRAINT. A SPOKESMAN SAID THURSDAY THAT THE UNITED STATES HAS BEEN EXERTING EVERY EFFORT TO DIFFUSE THE SITUATION, AND IS CONSULTING WITH ALL THE PARTIES CONCERNED TOWARD THAT END.

BUT REPORTS FROM LEBANON SAY THE MOOD THERE NOW IS GLOOMY. FIGHTING IN THE NORTH DIED DOWN, BUT IT MUSHROOMED AGAIN IN BEIRUT, AND THE COUNTRY BRACED ITSELF FOR MORE VIOLENCE.

GH/RCS